DICK IN THE DESERT

BY

JAMES OTIS

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THOMAS Y. CROWELL & COMPANY,
NEW YORK.

"Thanks to the timely Attention, Dick soon opened his Eyes."— Page 48.

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BY

JAMES OTIS

AUTHOR OF "HOW TOMMY SAVED THE BARN," ETC.

NEW YORK
THOMAS Y. CROWELL & COMPANY
PUBLISHERS

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TYPOGRAPHY BY C. J. PETERS & SON, BOSTON.

PRESSWORK BY S. J. PARKHILL & CO.

For the lad to whom I have given the name of Dick Stevens this little story has been written, with the hope that he may enjoy the reading of it even as I did his modest manner of telling it.

James Otis.

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DICK IN THE DESERT.

CHAPTER I.

DICK'S DADDY.

BETWEEN Fox Peak and Smoke Creek Desert, on the western edge of the State of Nevada, is a beautiful valley, carpeted with bunch grass, which looks particularly bright and green to the venturesome traveller who has just crossed either of the two deserts lying toward the east.

"Buffalo Meadows" the Indians named it, because of the vast herds of American bison found there before the white men hunted simply for the sport of killing; but those who halt at the last watercourse prior to crossing the wide stretches of sand on the journey east, speak of it as "Comfort Hollow."

To a travel-stained party who halted at the

water-pool nearest the desert on a certain afternoon in September two years ago, this last name seemed particularly appropriate.

They had come neither for gold nor the sport of hunting; but were wearily retracing their steps, after having wandered and suffered among the foot-hills of the Sierras in a fruitless search for a home, on which they had been lured by unscrupulous speculators.

Nearly two years previous Richard Stevens—"Roving Dick" his acquaintances called him—had first crossed the vast plain of sand, with his wife, son, and daughter.

His entire worldly possessions consisted of a small assortment of household goods packed in a stout, long-bodied wagon, covered with canvas stretched over five poles bent in a half-circle, and drawn by two decrepit horses.

The journey had been a failure, so far as finding a home in the wilds was concerned, where the head of the family could live without much labor; and now the homeless ones, decidedly the worse for wear, were returning to Willow Point, on the Little Humboldt River.

The provisions had long since been exhausted; the wagon rudely repaired in many places; the cooking utensils were reduced to one pot and a

battered dipper; the canvas covering was torn and decaying, and the horses presented a skeleton-like appearance.

The family had suffered outwardly quite as much as the goods. Young Dick and his father wore clothing which had been patched and re-patched with anything Mrs. Stevens could push a needle through, until it would have been impossible to say what was the original material; but to a boy thirteen years of age this seemed a matter of little consequence, while his father preferred such a costume rather than exert himself to tan deer-hides for one more serviceable.

Mrs. Stevens and six-year-old Margie were in a less forlorn condition as to garments; but they also needed a new outfit sadly, and nearly every day young Dick told them confidentially that he would attend to the matter immediately after arriving at Willow Point, even if it became necessary for him to sell his rifle, the only article of value he owned.

"Once across the desert, mother," he said, as the sorry-looking team was drawn up by the side of the pool, and he began to unharness the horses while his father went in search of game for supper, "and then we shall be well on our way to the old home we had no business to leave."

"It is this portion of the journey that worries

me most, Dick. You remember what a hard time we had when the animals were in good condition; and now that they are hardly able to drag their own bones along, the danger is great."

"No more than when we crossed the river; and even though father did feel afraid there, we got along all right," was the cheerful reply. "There should be plenty of game here, and after a square feed things won't look so bad."

Mrs. Stevens turned wearily away to make preparations for the evening meal in case the hunter should bring in a supply of meat, but made no reply. She understood why young Dick spoke encouragingly, and felt proud that the boy displayed so much tenderness for her; yet the fact could not be disguised that dangers beset the little party on every hand.

It required but a small amount of labor in order to make ready for the night.

Tired as the horses were, there was no likelihood of their straying very far; and Dick simply removed the harness, allowing the animals to roam at will. The wagon served as a camp; and the most arduous task was that of gathering materials with which to make a fire, when nothing larger than a bush could be seen on either hand.

Then there was no more to be done save await

the return of the hunter, and it was not until the shadows began to lengthen into the gloom of night that young Dick felt seriously alarmed.

He knew his father would not have gone very far from the camp in search of game, because he was on foot, and there was no more promising place for sport than within the radius of a mile from where they had halted. Besides, when hunting took the form of labor which must be performed, Richard Stevens was not one who would continue it long, unless he was remarkably hungry.

Young Dick's mother gave words to her anxiety several times; but the boy argued with her that no harm could have befallen the absent one in that vicinity, and for a time her fears were allayed.

When another hour passed, however, and nothing was heard from his father, even Dick lost courage, and believed that the culminating point in their troubles had been reached.

His mother and Margie had entered the wagon when night was fully come, knowing they must go supperless to bed unless the hunter returned; and to Dick the thought that these two whom he loved so dearly were hungry, brought him almost as much sorrow as the unaccountable absence of his father.

He believed, however, that it was his duty to appear unconcerned, as if confident his father's

prolonged absence did not betoken danger. He trudged to and fro in the immediate vicinity of the vehicle, at times whistling cheerily to show there was no trouble on his mind; and again, when it was impossible to continue the melody because of the sorrow in his heart, repeated to his mother that nothing serious could have befallen the absent one, that probably he had unconsciously wandered a long distance from the camp on the trail of game.

"It don't stand to reason he will try to make his way now it is dark, mother dear; but within an hour or two after sunrise he'll be here, and the breakfast we shall then have will make up for the loss of supper."

Mrs. Stevens made no reply; and listening a moment, Dick heard the sound of suppressed sobs.

His mother was in distress, and he could do no more toward comforting her than repeat what he did not absolutely believe.

He knew full well that unless some accident had befallen him, his father would have returned before dark; that he would not have allowed himself to be led so far away from the camping-place that he could not readily return; and the boy's sorrow was all the greater because it was impossible to console his mother.

Clambering into the wagon, he put his arms

around her neck, pressing his cheek close against hers, and during what seemed a very long while the two remained silent, not daring to give words to their fears.

Then Dick bethought himself of a plan which offered some slight degree of hope, and starting up suddenly, said, —

"I ought to have done it before, an' it ain't too late now."

"Done what, Dick dear?"

"Gone out in the direction father took, and fired the rifle two or three times. It may be he has lost his bearings, and the report of the gun would be enough to let him know where we are."

"But you must not go now that it is dark, my boy. Suppose you should lose your way? Then what would become of Margie and me?"

"There's no danger of that, mother. I've been in the woods often enough to be able to take care of myself, surely."

"Your father would have said the same thing when he set out; but yet we know some accident must have befallen him."

"Let me go only a little way, mother."

"Of what avail would that be, my son? If the purpose is to discharge your rifle, hoping father may hear the report, why not do it here?"

"I will, if you won't let me go farther."

"I can't, Dick dear. I might be braver under other circumstances, but now the thought of your leaving me is more than I can bear."

"I won't go so far but that I can see the wagon," Dick said, kissing his mother and little Margie much as though bidding them good-by; and a few moments later the report of his rifle almost startled the occupants of the wagon.

During the next hour Dick discharged his weapon at least twelve times, but there was no reply of whatsoever nature.

If his father was alive and within hearing, he was too badly disabled to give token of his whereabouts.

The supply of cartridges was not so large that very many could be used without making a serious inroad upon the store; and realizing the uselessness of further efforts in this direction, Dick went back to the wagon.

Margie had fallen asleep, her head pillowed in her mother's lap; and Mrs. Stevens, unwilling to disturb the child, was taking such rest as was possible while she leaned against the canvas covering of the wagon.

Dick seated himself beside her. It was not necessary he should speak of his failure, for she knew that already.

He had thought it his duty to join her for a few moments, and then go outside again to act the part of sentinel, although such labor could be of little avail; but before he had been nestling by her side five minutes his eyes were closed in slumber; and the mother, her mind reaching out to the absent father, spent the hours of the night in wakefulness, watching over her children.

The sun had risen before Dick's eyes were opened; and springing to his feet quickly, ashamed of having slept while his mother kept guard, he said, —

"I didn't mean to hang on here like a baby while you were awake, mother, but my eyes shut before I knew it."

"It is well you rested, my son. Nothing could have been done had you remained awake."

"Perhaps not; but I should have felt better, because if anything has happened to father, though I don't say it can be possible, I'm the one who must take care of you and Margie."

Mrs. Stevens kissed the boy, not daring to trust herself to speak; and he hurried out, for there was before him a full day's work, if he would do that which he had decided upon in his mind the evening previous.

There was no reasonable hope any one would come that way for many days — perhaps months.

They were alone, and whatever was done must be accomplished by this thirteen-year-old boy.

"I'm going after something for breakfast, mother, and then count on trying to follow father's trail," Dick said, after looking around in every direction, even though he knew there was no possibility of seeing any human being.

"There is no reason why you should spend the time in trying to get food for us, Dick dear. Margie and I can get on very well without breakfast, and you will have the more time to hunt for your father; but remember, my boy, that you are the only one we can depend upon now, and without you we might remain here until we starved."

"I'll take good care not to go so far from the wagon but that I can find my way back; for surely I'll be able to follow on my own trail, if there's no other. Hadn't I better do a little hunting first?"

"Not unless you are very, very hungry, Dick. Food would choke me just now, and there is enough of the bread we baked yesterday morning to give you and Margie an apology for a breakfast."

"I can get along without; you shall eat my share. Now, don't worry if I'm not back until near sunset. The horses are close at hand, and you may be certain they won't stray while the feed is plentiful. Stay in the wagon, even though there is noth-

ing to harm you if you walk around. We must be careful that no more trouble comes upon us; so keep under cover, mother dear, and I'll be here again before night comes."

Dick was not as confident he could follow his father's trail as he would have it appear to his mother; but he decided upon the direction in which he would search, and set bravely out heading due west, knowing he could hold such a course by aid of the sun's position, as his father had often explained to him.

Dick was hungry, but scorned to let his mother know it, and tried to dull the edge of his appetite by chewing twigs and blades of grass.

After walking rapidly ten minutes, more careful as to direction than he ever had been, because of the responsibility that rested upon him, he stopped and shouted his father's name; then listened, hoping to hear a reply.

Save for the hum of insect life, no sound came to his anxious ears.

Once more he pressed forward, and again shouted, but without avail.

He continued on until, seeing the trail made by the wagon when they had come in from the stream, he knew he was very near to the border of the valley.

Surely his father would not have gone outside, because he had said before they arrived that only in the Buffalo Meadows were they likely to find game.

Then Dick turned, pushing on in a northerly direction at right angles with the course he had just been pursuing, and halting at five-minute intervals to shout.

His anxiety and hunger increased equally as the day grew older. Try as he might, he could not keep the tears from over-running his eyelids.

The sun was sinking toward the west before he heard aught of human voice save his own; and then a cry of joy and relief burst from his lips as he heard faintly in the distance his own name spoken.

"I'm coming! I'm coming!" he cried at the full strength of his lungs, as he dashed forward, exultant in the thought that his father was alive, for he had begun to believe that he would never see him again in this world.

Mr. Stevens continued to call out now and then to guide the boy on the way, and as he drew nearer Dick understood from the quavering tones that his father was in agony.

"I'm coming, daddy! I'm coming!" he shouted yet louder, as if believing it was necessary to animate the sufferer, for he now knew that some pain-

ful accident had befallen his father; and when he finally ended the search his heart literally ceased beating because of his terror and dismay.

Dick believed he had anticipated the worst, but yet was unprepared for that which he saw.

Lying amid the blood-stained sage-grass, his shirt stripped into bandages to tie up a grievously injured limb, lay "Roving Dick," his face pallid, his lips bloodless, and his general appearance that of one whom death has nearly overtaken.

"Daddy! daddy!" Dick cried piteously, and then he understood that consciousness had deserted the wounded man.

He had retained possession of his faculties until aid was near at hand, and then the long strain of physical and mental agony had brought about a collapse.

Dick raised his father's head tenderly, imploring him to speak — to tell him what should be done; but the injured man remained silent as if death had interposed to give him relief.

Looking about scrutinizingly, as those born and bred on the frontier learn to do early in life, Dick saw his father's rifle twenty feet or more away, and between it and him a trail of blood through the sage-brush, then a sinister, crimson blotch on the sand.

Mr. Stevens's right leg was the injured member, and it had been wrapped so tightly with the improvised bandages that the boy could form no idea as to the extent of the wound; but he knew it must indeed be serious to overcome so thoroughly one who, though indolent by nature, had undergone much more severe suffering than he could have known since the time of leaving the wagon to search for game.

It seemed to Dick as if more than ten minutes elapsed before his father spoke, and then it was to ask for water.

He might as well have begged for gold, so far as Dick's ability to gratify the desire was concerned.

"To get any, daddy, I may have to go way back to the wagon, for I haven't come upon a single watercourse since leaving camp this morning."

"Your mother and Margie?"

"I left them at the camp. How did you get here?"

"It was just before nightfall. I had been stalking an antelope; was crawling on the ground dragging my rifle, when the hammer must have caught amid the sage-brush; the weapon was discharged, and the bone of my leg appears to be shattered."

"Poor, poor daddy!" and Dick kissed him on the forehead.

"We must be four miles from the camp," Mr. Stevens said, speaking with difficulty because of his parched and swollen tongue.

"I should say so; but I went toward the west, and after travelling until noon struck across this way, so have no idea of the distance."

"I shall die for lack of water, Dick, even though the wound does not kill me."

"How shall I get it, daddy?" the boy cried piteously. "I can't leave you here alone, and I don't believe there's a drop nearer than where we are camped."

"You *must* leave me, Dick; for you can do no good while staying here, and the thought that help is coming, even though there may be many hours to wait, will give me strength. Can you find your way to the camp and back after nightfall?"

"I'll do it somehow, daddy! I'll do it!"

"Then set out at once, and bring one of the horses back with you. I should be able to ride four miles, or even twice that distance, since it is to save my life."

"But you'll keep up a brave heart, daddy dear, won't you? Don't think you are going to die; but remember that mother and I, and even little Margie, will do all we can to pull you through."

"I know it, Dick, I know it. You are a good

lad — far better than I have been father; and if it should chance that when you come back I've gone from this world, remember that you are the only one to whom the mother and baby can look for protection."

"You know I'd always take care of them; but I am going to save you, daddy dear. People have gotten over worse wounds than this, and once you are at the camp we will stay in Buffalo Meadows till it is possible for you to ride. I'll look out for the whole outfit, and from this on you sha'n't have a trouble, except because of the wound."

"Give me your hand, my boy, and now go; for strong as may be my will, I can't stand the loss of much more blood. God bless you, Dick, and remember that I always loved you, even though I never provided for you as a father should have done."

Dick hastily cleared the mist from his eyes, and without speaking darted forward in the direction where he believed the wagon would be found, breaking the sage-brush as he ran in order that he might make plain the trail over which he must return.

CHAPTER II.

A LONELY VIGIL.

T was not yet dark when Dick arrived within sight of the wagon, and shouted cheerily that those who were so anxiously awaiting his coming might know he had been fortunate in the search.

As soon as his voice rang out, startlingly loud because of the almost oppressive stillness, Mrs. Stevens appeared from beneath the flap of the canvas covering, and an expression of most intense disappointment passed over her face as she saw that Dick was alone.

"It's all right, mother!" he cried, quickening his pace that she might the sooner be relieved from her suspense. "It's all right!"

"Did you find your father?"

"Yes; an' I've come back for one of the horses. He's been hurt, an' can't walk."

"Thank God he is alive!" she cried, and then for the first time since the previous evening she gave way to tears.

Dick did all he could toward comforting her without making any delay in setting out on the return journey.

While he filled the canteen with fresh water he repeated what his father had bidden him to say; and when his mother asked concerning the wound, he spoke as if he did not consider it serious.

"Of course it's bad, for he thinks one of the bones has been splintered; but I don't see why he shouldn't come 'round all right after a spell. We've known of people who had worse hurts and yet got well."

"But they were where at least something of what might be needed could be procured, while we are here in the desert."

"Not quite so bad as that, mother dear. We have water, and I should be able to get food in plenty. After I've supplied the camp, I'm goin' on foot to Antelope Spring, where we can buy whatever daddy may need."

"Across the desert alone!"

"A boy like me ought to be able to do it, and"—

"Your father hasn't a penny, Dick dear."

"I know that, mother; but I'll sell my rifle before he shall suffer for anything. Now don't worry, and keep up a good heart till I come back."

"Can't I be of some assistance if I go too?"

"You'd better stay here with Margie. Father and I can manage it alone, I reckon."

Then Dick set about catching one of the horses; and as he rode the sorry-looking steed up to the wagon, his mother gave him such articles from her scanty store as the wounded man might need.

"You're a good boy, Dick," she said, as he stooped over to kiss her; "and some day you shall have your reward."

"I'll get it now, mother, if I see you looking a little more jolly; and indeed things ain't quite so bad as they seem, for I can pull our little gang through in great shape, though I'm afraid after it's been done I sha'n't be able to get you and Margie the new outfit I promised."

"We should be so thankful your father is alive as not to realize that we need anything else."

"But you do, just the same, whether you realize it or not; an' I'll attend to everything if I have time enough. Don't trouble yourself if we're not back much before morning, for I reckon daddy can't stand it to ride faster than a walk."

Then, without daring to stop longer, lest he should betray some sign of weakness, Dick rode away, waving his hand to Margie, who was looking out of the rear end of the wagon, but giving

vent to a sigh which was almost a sob when they could no longer see him.

Young though he was, Dick understood full well all the dangers which menaced. Although he had spoken so confidently of being able to "pull the gang through," he knew what perils were before them during the journey across the desert; and it must be made within a reasonably short time, otherwise they might be overtaken by the winter storms before arriving at their old home.

The beast he rode, worn by long travelling and scanty fare, could not be forced to a rapid pace; and when night came Dick was hardly more than two miles from the wagon.

He could have walked twice the distance in that time; but the delay was unavoidable, since only on the horse's back could his father be brought into camp.

When it was so dark that he could not see the broken sage-brush which marked the trail, it was necessary he should dismount, and proceed even at a slower pace; but he continued to press forward steadily, even though slowly, until, when it seemed to him that the night was well-nigh spent, he heard a sound as of moaning a short distance in advance.

"I've come at last, daddy. It's been a terrible long while, I know; but it was the best I could"—

He ceased speaking very suddenly as he stood by the side of the sufferer, whom he could dimly see by the faint light of the stars.

From the broken and uprooted sage-brush around him, it was evident the wounded man had, most likely while in a delirium of fever, attempted to drag himself on in the direction of the camp, and had ceased such poor efforts only when completely exhausted.

He was lying on his back, looking straight up at the sky as he alternately moaned and talked at random, with now and then a mirthless laugh which frightened the boy.

"Don't, daddy, don't!" he begged, as he raised the sufferer's head. "See, it's Dick come back; and now you can ride into camp!"

"Mother is dying of thirst, and I'm — see that stream! Come, boys, we'll take a header into it — I'm on fire — fire!"

Frightened though he was, Dick knew water was the one thing his father most needed; and laying the poor head gently back on the sand, he took the canteen from a bag which had served instead of a saddle.

"Drink this, daddy, and you'll feel better," he said coaxingly, much as if speaking to a child.

The wounded man seized the tin vessel eagerly,

and it required all Dick's strength to prevent him from draining it at once.

"I'm afraid to give you more now, my poor old man; but wait, like a dear, and I'll let you take it again when you're on the horse."

Not until after a violent struggle, which frightened Dick because it seemed almost as if he was raising his hand against his father, did he regain possession of the canteen, and then a full half of the contents had been consumed.

When his thirst was in a measure quenched, Mr. Stevens lay quietly on the sand, save now and then as he moaned in unconscious agony, heeding not the boy's pleading words.

"Try to help yourself a bit, daddy," he urged. "If you'll stand on one foot I can manage to lift you onto the horse's back."

Again and again did Dick try by words to persuade his father to do as he desired, and then he realized how useless were his efforts.

He had heard of this delirium which often follows neglect of gun-shot wounds, but had no idea how he should set about checking it.

After understanding that words were useless, and knowing full well he could not lift unaided such a weight onto the horse's back, he crouched by his father's side in helpless grief.

Never before had he known what it was to be afraid, however far he might be from others of his kind; but now, as he listened to the meaningless words, or the piteous moans, terror took possession of him, and the soft sighing of the gentle wind sounded in his ears like a menace.

The horse strayed here and there seeking food, but he gave no heed.

Such garments as his mother had given him, Dick spread over the sufferer; and that done there was nothing for him save to wait.

It seemed to the anxious boy as if the night would never end. Now and then he rose to his feet, scanning the eastern sky in the hope of seeing some signs of coming dawn; but the light of the stars had not faded, and he knew the morning was yet far away.

Finally, when it seemed to him as if he could no longer remain idle listening to a strong man's childish prattle, the eastern heavens were lighted by a dull glow, which increased steadily until he could see the horse feeding on the dry bunch-grass an hundred yards away, and his long vigil was nearly at an end.

His father called for water from time to time, and Dick had given him to drink from the canteen till no more than a cupful remained.

Now he asked again, but in a voice which sounded more familiar; and a great hope sprang up in the boy's heart as he said,—

"There's only a little left, you poor old man, and we can't get more this side the camp. Shall I give it to you now?"

"Let me moisten my lips, Dick dear. They are parched, and my tongue is swollen until it seems ready to burst."

Dick handed him the canteen; and his father drank sparingly, in marked contrast to his greedy swallowing of a few moments previous.

"It tastes sweet, my boy; and when we are at the camp I'll need only to look at the brook in order to get relief. Are you soon going for the horse?"

I went, an' have got back, daddy dear. You've been talking mighty queer — on account of the wound, I suppose."

"How long have you been with me, child?"

"I must have got here before midnight, and the morning is just coming now."

"You're a good boy, Dick."

"That's what mother said before I left, and between the two of you I'm afraid you'll make me out way beyond what I deserve. We must get back as soon as we can, you poor old man; for

she'll be crying her eyes sore with thinking we've both knocked under. Will we have a try at getting on horseback?"

"Yes; and I reckon it can be done. Lead the beast up here, and then help me on my feet — I've grown as weak as a baby, Dick."

"And I don't wonder at it. According to the looks of this sage-brush you must have lost half of all the blood you had at this time yesterday."

Now that his father was conscious once more, all Dick's reasonless terror fled, and again he was the manly fellow he had always shown himself to be.

The horse was led to Mr. Stevens's side; and Dick raised the nearly powerless body until, at the expense of most severe pain, but without sign of it by even so much as a groan, his father stood on the uninjured limb.

Fortunately the horse was too weary to make much protest at what followed; with a restive steed it would have been impossible for the boy to half lift, half push his father up until he was seated on the bag that served as saddle.

"How is it now, you poor old man? Can you hold on there a couple of hours?"

"I must, my boy; and if it so be I show signs of losing my reason again, you must contrive to

lash me here, for unless this wound is attended to in better shape than it is just now, I'll go under."

"For mother's sake you must keep a good grip on yourself. It'll come tough, I know; but once we're in camp you shall live on the fat of the land."

Dick took up his father's rifle, — his own he had left in the wagon when he went after the horse, — and, leading the animal by the bridle, marched on, glancing back every few seconds to learn how the rider was faring.

Although he struggled to repress any evidence of pain, Mr. Stevens could not prevent the agony from being apparent on his face; and Dick, who had neither eaten nor slept during the past twenty-four hours, did all a boy could have done to cheer the sufferer, without thought of his own necessities.

"We'll soon be in camp, daddy, when you're to have everything you need," he said from time to time; and then, fancying this was not sufficient encouragement, he finally added, "you know I'm going over to Antelope Spring to get some doctor's stuff as soon as I've found game enough to keep the camp supplied while I'm away."

"Antelope Spring!" Mr. Stevens cried, aroused from his suffering for an instant by the bold assertion. "You shall never do it, Dick, not if I had

twenty wounds! It's as much as a man's life is worth to cross the desert on foot, and these horses of ours are worse than none at all."

"By the time we've been in camp a couple of weeks where the feed is good, they'll pick up in great shape, and be fit to haul the old wagon home. Won't it be prime to see the town once more? And there'll be no more hunting 'round for a place where we can get a livin' easy, eh, daddy?"

"No, Dickey; once we're there we'll stay, and I'm going to turn over a new leaf if my life is spared. I'll do more work and less loafing. But you're not to cross the desert alone, my boy."

"It may be travellers will come our way, an' I can go with them," Dick replied, taking good care not to make any promises; for he understood from what his mother had said that it would be absolutely necessary that aid should be had from the nearest settlement.

Fortunately, as it then seemed to the boy, the pain which his father was enduring prevented him from dwelling upon the subject; and as Dick trudged on, trying to force the horse into a more rapid gait, he turned over in his mind all he had heard regarding such a journey.

There were many times when it seemed certain Mr. Stevens must succumb to the suffering caused

by the wound; but he contrived to "keep a good grip" on himself, as Dick had suggested, and after what seemed the longest and most painful journey the boy had ever experienced, the two came upon landmarks which told they were nearing the encampment.

His father was ghastly pale. The big drops of sweat on his forehead told of intense pain; and, in order to revive his courage yet a little longer, Dick shouted loudly to warn the dear ones who were waiting.

"They'll soon come running to meet us; and you must put on a bold front, daddy, else mother will think you're near dead. Hold hard a little while longer, and then we'll have you in the wagon, where all hands of us can doctor you in great shape."

It is more than probable that, had he been alone, with no one to cheer him, Mr. Stevens might never have been able to endure the agony which must have been his. Thanks to Dick's cheering words, however, he not only kept his seat, but remained conscious until his wife and son lifted him from the horse to the bed hastily prepared in the vehicle.

Then nature asserted herself; and he speedily sank into unconsciousness accompanied by delirium, as when Dick had watched by his side.

"He was just that way all night, and it frightened me, mother. What can we do for him?"

"I don't know, Dick dear; indeed I don't. Unless he can have proper attention death must soon come, and I am ignorant of such nursing as he needs. If we were only where we could call in a doctor!"

"Wouldn't it do almost as well if we had medicine for him?"

"Perhaps so; but if we could get such things it would also be possible to at least find out what we should do."

"The horses wouldn't pull us across the desert until after they've rested a spell," Dick said half to himself.

"And even if they could, we must have food."

"See here, mother; you fix up daddy's leg the best you know how, and I'll look around for something that'll fill the pot. There are rabbits here in plenty, though it's mighty hard luck when you have to waste a cartridge on each one. I'll have enough in the way of meat by the time you've washed the wound. I've heard the poor old man himself say that plenty of cool water was needed on a bullet-hole."

Mrs. Stevens could not be hopeful under the circumstances, for she knew better than did Dick how

slight was the chance that the injured man could live where it was impossible to care properly for the wound; but she would not deprive the boy of hope, and turned to do as he suggested.

Although weary and footsore, Dick did not spend many moments in camp.

He waited only long enough to get his rifle and ammunition, and then trudged off; for meat must be had, even at the expense of cartridges, both for the wounded man and the remainder of the family.

An hour later Dick returned with two rabbits; and when these had been made ready for cooking, he clambered into the wagon to see his father.

The invalid looked more comfortable, even though nothing had been done for his relief save to cleanse the wound, and dress it in such fashion as was possible; but he was still in the delirium, and after kissing the pale forehead, Dick went to where his mother was making ready for the long-delayed meal.

"I don't reckon there's a bit of anything to eat, mother?"

"I shall soon have these rabbits cooked."

"But I must be off after larger game, and don't want to wait till dinner is ready."

"You need the food, Dickey, and there is only a tiny bit of bread."

"Give me that, mother dear. It will stop the

hole in my stomach for a spell, and when I come back there'll be plenty of time to eat meat."

Had the circumstances been one whit less grave, Mrs. Stevens would not have consented to his setting out before having eaten a hearty meal; but she knew that more meat would soon be needed, since they had no other food, and two rabbits would hardly provide the famishing ones with enough to stay their hunger for the time being.

The piece of bread, baked the day previous from the last of their store of flour, was brought out; and, munching it slowly that it might seem to be more, Dick started off again.

Not until nearly nightfall did he return; but he had with him such portion of a deer's carcass as he could drag, and all fear of starvation was banished from camp.

The wounded man was resting more comfortably, if such term can be applied properly when one is suffering severest pain; and after hanging the meat beneath the wagon, Dick questioned his mother as to what might be done if they were within reach of a physician.

"If we could see one, Dickey, your father's life might be saved, for such a wound should not be exceedingly dangerous. If I knew how to treat it, and had the proper washes, we ought to nurse him

back to life; but as it is, I haven't even that which would check the fever."

"If you could talk to a doctor would it be all right?"

"I believe so, Dickey."

"Would the medecine you want cost very much?"

"It is the same to us whether the price be much or little, since we haven't the opportunity to get what is needed, nor the money with which to pay for it if a shop were near at hand."

Dick ceased his questioning, and set about performing such work around the camp as might well have been left undone until the next day.

A generous supply of broiled venison was made ready, and the boy ate heartily; after which he went into the wagon, telling his mother he would play the part of nurse until dark, when she could take his place.

Once in the vehicle, partially screened from view, Dick, after much search for the bit of a lead-pencil his father owned, wrote on a piece of brown paper that had contained the last ten pounds of flour Mr. Stevens had purchased, the following words, —

DEAR MOTHER, — I know you won't let me go to Antelope Spring if I tell you about what I'm minded to do, so I shall slip off the first thing in the morning. I'll take my rifle with me, and by selling it, get what stuff daddy needs. I can talk with a

doctor too; and when I come back we'll fix the poor old man up in great shape.

Don't worry about me, for I can get across without any bother. I'm going to take the canteen and some slices of meat, so I sha'n't be hungry or thirsty. I count on being back in three days; but if I'm gone five you mustn't think anything has gone wrong, for it may be a longer trip than I'm reckonin' on.

I love you, and daddy, and Margie mighty well; and this footing it across the desert ain't half as dangerous as you think for.

Your son,
DICKEY.

When this had been done, he kissed his father twice, smoothed the hair back from the pale, damp forehead, and whispered, —

"I'm going so's you'll get well, my poor old man; and you mustn't make any kick, 'cause it's *got* to be done."

Then he came out as if tired of playing the nurse, and proposed that he sleep under the wagon that night.

"With all hands inside, daddy would be crowded; and I'm as well off out-of-doors. Kiss me, mother, for I'm mighty tired."

CHAPTER III.

A SAND-STORM.

N this proposal to retire thus early Mrs. Stevens saw nothing to excite her suspicions regarding Dick's real intentions. He had worked for thirty-six hours almost incessantly; and it would not be strange if this unusual exertion, together with the weariness caused by excitement, had brought him to the verge of exhaustion.

His mother would have insisted upon bringing out one of the well-worn blankets, but that Dick was decidedly opposed to taking anything from the wagon which might in the slightest degree contribute to his father's comfort.

"I'm very well off on the bare ground, and with the wagon to shelter me from the dew I couldn't be better fixed. Our poor old man needs all we've got, mother; and you may be sure I won't lay awake thinking of the feather-beds we had at Willow Point, 'cause it's about as much as I can do to keep my eyes open."

"You are a dear good boy, and God will reward you. In addition to saving your father's life, for that is what you've done this day, you have lightened my burden until it would be wicked to repine."

"I'll risk your ever doing anything very wicked, mother; and if the time comes when it seems to you as though I don't do exactly as you want me to, just remember all you've said about my being a good boy, an' let it be a stand-off, will you?"

"I am certain you will never do anything to cause me sorrow, Dickey, dear. Don't get up until you have been thoroughly rested; for now that we have food in camp, I can do all that will be necessary."

Then Dick's mother kissed him again, not leaving him until he had stretched out at full length under the wagon; and so tired was the boy that Mrs. Stevens had hardly got back to take up her duties as nurse when his loud breathing told that he was asleep.

When Dick awakened it was still dark; but he believed, because he no longer felt extremely weary, that the night was nearly spent; and for the success of his plan it was of the utmost importance he should set out before his mother was astir.

It was his purpose to travel on foot to Antelope Spring, a distance in an air-line of about forty-five

miles, fifteen of which would be across the upper portion of Smoke Creek Desert.

In this waste of sand lay all the danger of the undertaking. The number of miles to be travelled troubled him but little, for more than once had he walked nearly as far in a single day while hunting; and he proposed to spend thirty-six hours on each stage of the journey.

Creeping cautiously out from under the wagon, he fastened his letter to the flap of the canvas covering in such a manner that his mother could not fail to see it when she first came out; and then he wrapped in leaves several slices of broiled venison, after which he stowed them in his pocket.

The canteen was filled at a spring near-by.

He saw to it that his ammunition belt contained no more than half a dozen cartridges, and then took up his rifle, handling it almost lovingly; for this, his only valuable possession, he intended to part with in order to secure what might be necessary for his father's relief and comfort.

The weapon was slung over his back where it would not impede his movements; and with a single glance backward he set out with a long, swinging stride such as he knew by experience he could maintain for many hours.

It was still dark when he had crossed the fertile

meadows, and arrived at the border of an apparently limitless expanse of yellow sand.

Here it would not be possible to maintain the pace at which he had started, because of the loose sand in which his feet sank to the depth of an inch at each step.

Having set out at such an early hour, this boy, who was perilling his life in the hope of aiding his father, believed the more dangerous portion of the journey might be accomplished before the heat of the day should be the most severe.

When the sun rose Dick had travelled, as nearly as he could estimate, over three miles of desert; and his courage increased with the knowledge that one-fifth of the distance across the sands had already been traversed.

At the end of the next hour he said to himself that he must be nearly midway on the road of sand; and although the labor of walking was most severe, his heart was very light.

"Once across, I'll push on as fast as any fellow can walk," he said aloud, as if the sound of his own voice gave him cheer. "By making an extra effort I ought to be in Antelope Spring before midnight, and have plenty of time to sleep between now and morning. Half a day there to sell the rifle, an' buy what is needed, an' by sunset I

should be at the edge of the desert again, ready to make this part of the tramp after dark."

He walked quickly, and like one who intends to go but a short distance.

The forty-five-mile tramp seemed to him but a trifle as compared with what was to be gained by the making of it.

He thought of his mother as she read the note he had left on the flap of the wagon-covering, and wondered if she looked upon his departure as an act of disobedience, which, in fact, it was, since both his parents had insisted he should not attempt it.

Then his thoughts went out to his father, and he told over in his mind all the questions he would ask of the doctor at Antelope Spring; for he had no doubt but that he should find one of that profession there.

He took little heed to the monotonous view around him, until suddenly he saw in the distance what appeared to be a low-hanging cloud; then he said to himself that if a shower should spring up the sun's face would be covered, and the heat, which was now very great, must be lessened.

As this cloud advanced, descending to the sands while it rose toward the heavens, it grew more black; and on either side were long columns of

seeming vapor rising, and as rapidly disappearing.

Then across the darkness on that portion of the horizon something bright moved swiftly, as if a flash of lightning had passed over the face of the cloud; and in an instant the sun and the sky were shut out from view.

Now the clouds took on the appearance of a dense black fog, coming up from the southward over the desert, until Dick was seemingly looking at a gigantic wall, over the face of which shone now and then bright flashes of light.

There was a shrieking and moaning in the air, so it seemed to the startled boy; and he failed to understand the meaning of this strange scene, until, the impenetrable wall having come so near, he could see that what appeared like flashes of light were gigantic columns of sand springing high in the air with fantastic shapes, and glinted by the sun from above the apparent vapor, until they were swallowed up in the enormous bank of cloud behind them.

Then it was Dick knew the meaning of this terrible danger which threatened him.

It was a storm of sand. "Dancing giants" some have termed it, and others speak of it as the "hot blizzard."

As if in an instant the dancing, swirling columns and the rushing cloud of sand, which swayed to and fro in fantastic movements, surrounded him.

He was in the centre of a cyclone freighted with particles of sand.

The wind roared until one might have believed he heard the crash of thunder.

Dick halted, terrified, bewildered; and as he came to a standstill, it seemed to him that the clouds on every hand lowered until he could see the blue sky above. Then with a shriek from the wind the very sand beneath his feet rose and fell like billows of the sea.

The tempest was upon him.

He shielded his eyes with his arm; but the stinging, heated particles sought out every inch of his body, and his clothing afforded but little protection.

The sand penetrated his ears and nostrils, and burned his lips until they bled.

He had heard it said that to remain motionless in such a tempest means death; for wherever the wind meets with an obstruction, there it piles the sand in huge mounds, and his father had told of more than one hunter who had thus been buried alive.

It was death to remain motionless, and yet to move seemed impossible.

Whether he turned to the right or the left the whirlwind struck him with a fury which it was difficult to withstand. It was as if the wind swept in upon him from every point of the compass—as if he was the centre of this whirling, dancing, blinding, murderous onrush of sand.

The boy's throat was dry. He was burning with thirst.

The dust-laden air seemed to have literally filled his lungs, and it was with difficulty he could breathe.

Despite the protection he sought to give, his eyes were inflamed, and the lids cruelly swollen.

He sank ankle-deep at every step, and above him and around him the wild blasts shrieked, until there were times when he feared lest he should be thrown from his feet.

Pulling his hat down over his aching eyes, the bewildered, terrified boy tried to gain some relief from the thirst which assailed him.

He understood that the contents of his canteen must be guarded jealously; for if he lived there were still several miles of the desert journey to be traversed, and the walking would be even more difficult than before the storm set in, because of the shifting sand.

His distress rendered him reckless; and regard-

less of the future, he drank fully half the water in the canteen, bathing his eyes with a small quantity poured in the hollow of his hand.

It would have been better if he had not tried to find relief by this last method, for the flying particles of sand adhered to such portions of his face as were wet, forming a coating over the skin almost instantly.

He attempted to brush it off, and the gritty substance cut into his flesh as if he had rubbed it with emery-paper.

Then came into Dick's mind the thought that he should never more see his parents on this earth, and for the instant his courage so far deserted him that he was on the point of flinging himself face downward upon the sand.

Fortunately there appeared before his mental vision a picture of his father lying in the wagon with the certainty that death would come unless his son could bring relief, and this nerved the boy to yet greater exertion.

With his arms over his face, he pushed forward once more, not knowing whether he might be retracing his steps, or proceeding in the proper direction.

Every inch of advance was made against the fierce wind and drifting sand which nearly overthrew him.

Every breath he drew was choked with dust.

How long he thus literally fought against the elements it was impossible for him so much as to conjecture.

He knew his strength was spending rapidly; and when it seemed as if he could not take another step, he stumbled, and fell against a mound of sand.

It had been built by the "dancing giants" when some obstruction had been found in the path of the storm; and as Dick fell prostrate at the foot of this slight elevation, there instantly came a sense of deepest relief.

The sand was no longer thrown against him by the blast; the wind had ceased to buffet him; he was in comparative quiet, and for an instant he failed to understand the reason.

Then he realized that this mound, which had thrown him from his feet, was affording a shelter against the tempest, which was now coming from one direction instead of in a circle as heretofore; and a fervent prayer of thanksgiving went up from his heart, for he believed his life had been saved that he might aid his father.

After recovering in a measure from the exhaustion consequent upon his battle with the elements, he proceeded with infinite care to brush the par-

ticles of sand from his face; and this done, his relief was yet greater.

Overhead the air was full of darkness; the wind still screamed as it whirled aloft the spiral columns of dust; the wave-like drift of the sand surged on either side; but for the moment he was safe.

He had been told that such tempests were of but short duration, and yet it seemed to him as if already half a day had been spent in this fight for life.

Then he said to himself that he could remain where he was in safety until the wind had subsided; but even as the words were formed in his mind he was conscious of a weight upon his limbs as if something was bearing him down, and for the first time he realized that he was being rapidly buried alive.

To remain where he was ten minutes longer must be fatal; and perhaps even that length of time would not be allowed him, for if the wind so shifted as to cut off the top of the mound, then he would be overwhelmed as if in a landslide.

There was nothing for it but to go into the conflict once more; and in this second effort the odds would be still greater against him, because his courage was lessened.

He knew the danger which menaced, and the

suffering he would have to endure the instant he rose from behind the poor shelter; yet it was necessary, and the boy staggered to his feet.

There was nothing to guide him in the right direction, for all around was blackness and flying grit; yet he believed his way lay directly in the teeth of the storm, and because of such belief pressed onward, resolving that he would continue as long as was possible.

As he said to himself so he did, staggering this way and that, but ever pressing forward on the course which he believed to be the true one, blinded, choking, bewildered by the swirling particles until he was dimly conscious of falling, and then he knew no more.

At the moment Dick fell vanquished, hardly more than a quarter of a mile distant were two men mounted on Indian ponies, and leading three burros laden with a miner's outfit for prospecting.

To them the sand-storms of the desert were not strange; and with the knowledge born of experience they made preparations for "riding out the gale," when the low, dark cloud first appeared in the eastern horizon.

The animals were fastened with their heads together; the riders bending forward in the saddles,

and, as well as it could be accomplished, throwing over all the heads a number of blankets.

The two horsemen had taken the precaution while assuming this position to present their backs to the wind, and each had tied one end of his blanket around his waist in such manner that it could not be stripped off by the tempest.

Two or three blankets were fastened to the heads of the animals, and thus the faces of all were protected.

When the sand had whirled around them until the animals were buried nearly to their bellies, the riders forced the bunch onward ten or fifteen paces, continuing to make this change of location at least every five minutes during the entire time the tempest raged; and thus it was they escaped being buried in the downpour of sand.

From the time the first blast struck Dick, until the "dancing giants" whirled away to the westward, leaving the sky unclouded and the yellow sands shimmering in the sunlight, no more than thirty minutes had passed; yet in that short interval one human life on which others depended would have been sacrificed, unless these two travellers who were uninjured should chance to reach that exact spot where lay the boy partially covered by the desert's winding-sheet.

"You can talk of a gale at sea where the sailors are half drowned all the time; but it ain't a marker alongside of these 'ere red-hot blizzards, eh, Parsons?" one of the horsemen said as he threw off the blanket from his head with a long-drawn sigh of relief.

"Drownin' must be mighty pleasant kind of fun alongside of chokin' to death on account of bein' filled plum full with dry sand," Parsons replied. "I allow there ain't no call for us to stay here braggin' about our Nevada hurricanes, Tom Robinson, more especially since we'll make less headway now the sand has been stirred up a bit."

"There's nothin' to hold me here," Robinson replied with a laugh.

Straightway the two men turned their ponies' heads toward the west; and as they advanced the patient burros, laden with a miscellaneous assortment of goods until little else than their heads and tails could be seen, followed steadily in the rear.

Five minutes after they had resumed their journey Parsons cried, as he raised himself in the stirrups, shading his eyes with his hands as he peered ahead,—

"What's that 'ere bit of blue out there? Part of somebody's outfit? or was there a shipwreck close at hand?"

"It's a man — most likely a tenderfoot, if he tried to walk across this 'ere desert."

The two halted, and Dick Stevens's life was saved.

Had the storm lasted two or three minutes longer, or these prospectors gone in any other direction, he must have died where he had fallen.

Now he was dragged out from beneath the weight of sand, and laid upon a blanket, while the men, knowing by experience what should be done in such cases, set about restoring the boy to consciousness.

Thanks to the timely attention, Dick soon opened his eyes, stared around him for an instant in bewilderment, and then exclaimed as he made a vain attempt to rise, —

"I come pretty near knockin' under, didn't I? The last I remember was of fallin'."

"I allow it was the closest shave you'll ever have agin," Parsons replied grimly; "an' I'm free to say that them as are sich fools as to cross this 'ere sand-barren afoot oughter stay on it, like as you were in a fair way of doin' before we come along."

"An' that's what daddy would say, I s'pose. If he'd known what I was goin' to do, there would have been a stop put to it, even though it was to save his life I came."

"How can you save anybody's life by comin' out in sich a tom-fool way as this? Less than a quart of water, and not so much as a blanket with which to protect yourself."

"I can do it by goin' to Antelope Spring an' findin' a doctor," Dick replied. "You see, daddy shot himself in the leg — stove a bone all to pieces; and mother don't know what to do, so I slid off this mornin' without tellin' anybody."

"Countin' on footin' it to Antelope Spring?" Parsons asked as if in surprise.

"Yes; it ain't more'n forty-five miles the way we've reckoned it."

"Where did you start from?"

"Buffalo Meadows."

"And when did you count on makin' that forty-five miles?"

"I allowed to get there before midnight."

"Where's your camp?"

"Well, we haven't got anything you can rightly call a camp; but we're located in a prairie schooner near by the spring in the valley."

"How many in the party?"

"Daddy, mother, an' Margie."

The two men looked at Dick an instant, and then glanced at each other, after which Parsons said emphatically, —

"The boy has got grit; but the old man must have been way off to come through this section of the country in a wagon."

Dick explained how it was they chanced to be travelling, and then, eager to gain all the information possible, asked, —

"Do you know anything about Antelope Spring?"

"Nothin' good. There's a settlement by that name; but it's a no-account place."

"I s'pose I'll find a doctor?"

"I reckon they've got somethin' of the kind hangin' 'round. But are you countin' on draggin' one down to Buffalo Meadows?"

"I don't expect to be so lucky. But mother seemed to have the idea that if somebody who knew all about it would tell her how to take care of daddy's wound, she'd get along with such stuff as I could fetch to help him out in the fever. Say, I don't reckon either of you wants to buy a good rifle? There ain't a better one on Humboldt River;" and as he spoke Dick unslung the weapon which hung at his back.

"What's your idea in sellin' the gun? It strikes me, if you're countin' on pullin' through from Buffalo Meadows to Willow Point, you'll need it."

"Of course I shall; but it's got to go. You see, daddy's dead broke, an' I must have money to pay

for the doctor's stuff. I don't s'pose you want it; but if you did, here's a good chance. If you don't buy I reckon there'll be some one up to Antelope Spring who'll take it off my hands."

"Haven't you got anything else you can put up, instead of lettin' the rifle go? In this section of the country a tool like that will stand a man good agin starvation."

"It's all I own that's worth anything, an' I'll be mighty sorry to lose it; but she's got to go."

Again the men looked at the boy, then at each other; and Parsons motioned for his companion to follow him a short distance away, where, to Dick's great surprise, they began an animated conversation.

CHAPTER IV.

AT ANTELOPE SPRING.

DICK was perplexed by the behavior of these two strangers. He failed utterly to understand why they should have anything of such a private nature to discuss that it was necessary to move aside from him; for in a few moments they would be alone on the desert, after he had gone his way.

The discussion, or conversation, whichever it may have been, did not occupy many moments; but brief as was the time, Dick had turned to continue his journey at the instant when the men rejoined him.

"What do you allow you ought to get for that rifle?" Parsons asked abruptly.

"That's what I don't know. You see, I didn't buy it new, but traded for her before we left home. It seems to me she ought to be a bargain at — at — ten dollars."

"An' if you get the cash you're goin' to blow it right in for what the doctor can tell you, an' sich

stuff as he thinks your old man ought to have eh?"

"That's what I'll do if it costs as much."

"S'posen it don't? Allow that you've got five dollars left, what then?"

"I'll buy flour, an' bacon, an' somethin' for mother an' Margie with the balance."

"Do you mean to tell me your father was sich a tenderfoot as to come down through this way without any outfit?" Robinson asked sternly.

"He had plenty at the time we started; but you see we struck bad luck all the way along, and when we pulled into Buffalo Meadows we had cooked the last pound of flour. There wasn't even a bit of meat in the camp when he got shot. I knocked over a deer last night, an' that will keep 'em goin' till I get back."

"An' a kid like you is supportin' a family, eh?" Parsons asked in a kindly tone.

"I don't know what kind of a fist I'm goin' to make of it; but that's what I'll try to do till daddy gets on his feet again. Say, how long do you s'pose it'll take a man to get well when one leg is knocked endways with a bullet plum through the bone of it?"

"It'll be quite a bit, I'm thinkin' — too long for you to stay in Buffalo Meadows at this time

of the year. Two months ought to do it, eh, Parsons?"

"Well, yes; he won't get 'round any quicker than that."

"I don't know as it makes much difference if he can't walk a great deal, 'cause after the horses have had plenty of grass for a couple of weeks we'll pull across this place; an' once on the other side I sha'n't worry but what I can take 'em through all right."

"Look here, my son," Robinson said, as he laid his hand on the lad's shoulder. "You've got plenty of sand, that's a fact. I allow there ain't a kid within a thousand miles of here that would tackle the contract you've taken this mornin'. If we wasn't bound to the Winnemucca Range, an it wasn't quite so late in the season, we'd help you out by goin' down to camp an' straightenin' things a bit; but it can't be done now. We'll buy your rifle though, an' that's what we've agreed on. Ten dollars ain't sich a big pile for the gun; but yet it's plenty enough — leastways, it's all we can afford to put out just now."

"I'll be mighty glad to sell it for that if you need a rifle; an' it'll be better to make the trade now than wait till I get into Antelope Spring, 'cause there's no dead certainty I'll find anybody there who'll buy it."

Parsons took from a buckskin bag a small roll of bills, and when he had counted out ten dollars there was but little of the original amount remaining.

He handed the money to Dick; and the latter, after the briefest hesitation, held the rifle toward him.

"Sorry to give it up, eh?" Robinson asked.

"Well, I ain't when it comes to gettin' the money for daddy; if it wasn't for that I'd be. You see, it's the first one I ever owned, an' the way things look now, it'll be a good while before I get another."

"I'll tell you how we'll fix it, son. My partner an' I ain't needin' an extra rifle just now; an' more than as likely as not—in fact, I may say it's certain—we'll be up 'round your way before the winter fairly sets in. Now, if you could keep it for us till then, it would be the biggest kind of a favor, 'cause you see we're prospectin', an' have got about all the load the burros can tackle."

"You're—you're—sure you want to buy this gun, eh?"

"Well, if we wasn't, there wouldn't have been much sense in makin' the talk."

"But if you're prospectors, there isn't any show of your gettin' 'round to Willow Point."

"Oh, we drift up an' down, here an' there, just

as the case may be. There ain't any question about our trailin' all over the State in time, and you shall keep the rifle in good shape till we call for it. So long, my son. It's time for you to be hoofin' it, if you count on gettin' to Antelope Spring this side of to-morrow mornin'."

As he spoke, Parsons mounted his pony, Robinson following the example; and in another moment the two were on their way once more, leaving Dick in a painful state of uncertainty regarding their purpose in purchasing the gun.

During two or three minutes the boy stood where they had left him, and then cried, —

"Hello there! Hold on a minute, will you?"

"What's the matter now?" and Parsons looked over his shoulder, but neither he nor his partner reined in their steeds.

"Are you buyin' this rifle? or are you makin' believe so's to give me the ten dollars?"

"S'posen we was makin' believe?"

"Why then I wouldn't take the money, 'cause I ain't out begging."

"Don't fret yourself, my son. We've bought the gun all right; an' the next time we meet, you can hand it over. I wish our pile had been bigger so's we could have given twenty, 'cause a kid like you deserves it."

The horsemen continued on, and by this time were so far away that Dick would have been unwise had he attempted to overtake them.

He stood irresolutely an instant as if doubtful of the genuineness of this alleged business transaction.

It was as if the men feared he might attempt to overtake them; for despite the heavy loads on the burros they urged the beasts forward at their best pace, and Dick was still revolving the matter in his mind when they were a mile or more away.

"Well, it's no use for me to stand here tryin' to figure out whether they've given me this money or really mean to buy the rifle, for I've got to strike Antelope Spring between this time an' midnight. Now that there are ten dollars in my pocket, I'll be a pretty poor stick if I don't do it; but the sand-storm came mighty near windin' me up. It was the toughest thing I ever saw."

Then Dick set forward once more, toiling over the loose surface into which his feet sank three or four inches at every step; and when he finally stood on the firm soil east of this waste of shifting sand, it was two hours past noon.

As he had reckoned, there were more than thirty miles yet to be traversed; but the distance troubled him little.

He had in his possession that which would buy

such knowledge and such drugs as his father might need, and he believed it would be almost a sin to rebel even in his thoughts against the labor which must be performed.

Now he advanced, whistling cheerily, with a long stride and a swinging gait that should have carried him over the trail at the rate of four miles an hour; and not until late in the afternoon did he permit himself to halt, and partake of the broiled venison.

Then he ate every morsel, and, the meal finished, said aloud with a low laugh of perfect content: —

"It's lucky I didn't bring any more; for I should eat it to a dead certainty, an' then I wouldn't be in as good trim for walkin'. Daddy always says that the less a fellow has in his stomach the easier he can get over the ground, and the poor old man never struck it truer."

After this halt of fifteen minutes Dick pressed forward without more delay until he came upon the settlement, at what time he knew not, but to the best of his belief it was hardly more than an hour past midnight.

There was no thought in his mind of spending any portion of the money for a bed.

The earth offered such a resting-place as satisfied him; and since the day his father departed from

Willow Point in the hope of finding a location where he could earn a livelihood with but little labor, Dick had more often slept upon the ground than elsewhere.

Now he threw himself down by the side of a storehouse, or shed, where he would be protected from the night wind; and there was hardly more than time to compose himself for rest before his eyes were closed in slumber.

No person in Antelope Spring was awake at an earlier hour next morning than Dick Stevens; for the sun had not yet shown himself when the boy arose to his feet, and looked around as if to say that he was in fine condition.

"A tramp of forty-five miles ain't to be sneezed at, an' when you throw in fifteen miles of desert an' a sand-storm to boot, it's what I call a pretty good day's work; yet I'm feelin' fine as a fiddle," he said in a tone of satisfaction, after which he made an apology for a toilet at the stream near-by.

Dick had no idea in which direction a physician might be found; therefore he halted in front of the first store he saw to wait until the proprietor came, half an hour later, to attend to customers.

It was such a shop as one would naturally expect to find in a settlement among the mountains of Nevada.

From molasses to perfumery, and from ploughs to fish-hooks, the assortment ran, until one would say all his wants might be supplied from the stock.

Cheese was what Dick had decided upon for his morning meal; and after purchasing two pounds, together with such an amount of crackers as he thought would be necessary, he set about eating breakfast at the same time that he gained the desired information.

"I've come from the other side of Smoke Creek Desert," he began, speaking indistinctly because of the fulness of his mouth, "an' want to find a doctor."

"Ain't sick, are yer?" the shopkeeper asked with mild curiosity.

"Daddy shot himself in the leg, an' mother don't know what to do for him; so I've come up to hire a doctor to tell me, an' buy whatever he says is needed."

"A kid like you come across the desert! Where's your pony?"

"I haven't got any. Daddy's horses are so nearly played out that they've got to be left to grass two or three weeks, if we count on doin' anything with 'em."

"Did you walk across?" the shopkeeper asked incredulously.

"That's what I did;" and Dick told of his sufferings during the sand-storm, not in a boastful way, but as if it were his purpose to give the prospectors the praise they deserved.

When he had concluded, the proprietor plunged his hands deep in his pockets, surveyed the boy from head to foot much as Parsons and Robinson had, saying not a word until Dick's face reddened under the close scrutiny, when he exclaimed,—

"Well, I'll be jiggered! A kid of your size—say, how old are you, bub?"

"Thirteen."

"Well, a baby of thirteen lightin' out across Smoke Creek Desert, an' all for the sake of helpin' your dad, eh? Do you reckon you can bite out of Dr. Manter's ear all you want to know, an' then go back an' run the business?"

"It seems as if he ought to tell me what mother needs to do, an' I can remember every word. Then she said there would have to be some medicine to stop the fever; an' that's what I'm countin' on buyin', if he gives me the name of it."

"When are you goin' back?"

"I'm in hopes to get away this noon, an' then I'll be in camp by to-morrow mornin'."

"Say, sonny, do you want to stuff me with the yarn that you've travelled forty-five miles in less'n

thirty-six hours, an' count on doin' the same thing right over agin, which is ninety miles in less'n three days?"

"I've done the first half of the journey, an' it couldn't have been more'n two hours past midnight when I got here. With such a lay-out as this for breakfast I'll be in good shape for goin' back; an' it would be a mighty poor boy who couldn't get there between this noon an' to-morrow mornin', 'cause I'll go across the desert after dark, an' it ain't likely there'll be another sand-storm."

"Well, look here, sonny, stand right there for a minute, will you, while I go out? I won't be gone a great while, an' you can finish up your breakfast."

"But I want to see the doctor as soon as I can, you know."

"That'll be all right. I'll make it in my way to help you along so you sha'n't be kept in this town a single hour more'n 's necessary."

Having said this, and without waiting to learn whether his young and early customer was willing to do as he had requested, the proprietor of the store hurriedly left the building, and Dick had finished his meal before he returned.

The boy was stowing the remainder of the cheese and crackers into his pockets when the shopkeeper,

accompanied by two men, who looked as if they might have been hunters or miners, entered.

"Is this the kid?" one of the strangers asked, looking as curiously at the boy as had the proprietor.

"That's the one; an' the yarn he tells must be pretty nigh true, 'cause he met Parsons an' Robinson, an' accordin' to his story they bought his rifle, leavin' it with him till such time as they want to claim it."

The newcomers questioned Dick so closely regarding the journey and its purpose that he began to fear something was wrong, and asked nervously,—

"What's the reason I shouldn't have come up here? When a feller's father is goin' to die if he can't get a doctor afoul of him, it's a case of hustlin' right sharp."

"An' accordin' to the account you've given, that's about what you've been doin'," one of the strangers said with an approving nod, which reassured the boy to such an extent that he answered without hesitation the further questions which were asked.

When the curiosity of the men had been satisfied, one of those whom the landlord had brought in, and who was addressed by his companions as "Bob

Mason," said to Dick, as he laid his hand on the boy's shoulder, —

"We'll take care of you, my bold kid, an' see that you get all your father needs. If it wasn't that the doctor in this 'ere town is worked mighty hard, I'd make it my business to send him right down to your camp. But I reckon, if it's nothin' more'n a bullet through your dad's leg, he'll pull 'round all right with sich things as you can carry from here. Now come on, an' we'll find out what the pill-master thinks of the case."

Dick was thoroughly surprised that so much interest in his affairs should be manifested by strangers, and it pleased him that he was to have assistance in this search for medical knowledge.

He followed this new friend readily, and in a few moments was standing before the doctor, listening to Mr. Mason's highly colored version of the journey.

When he would have corrected the gentleman as to some of the points which had been exaggerated, he was kindly bade to "hold his tongue."

"I've heard all your yarn, my boy, an' can imagine a good many things you didn't tell. There's precious few of us in this section of the country that was ever overtook, while on foot, by the dancin' giants, an' lived to tell the story."

"I wouldn't be alive if it hadn't been for Mr. Parsons an' Mr. Robinson."

"What they did don't cut any figger. It's what you went through with that I'm talkin' about, an' the doctor is bound to hear the whole story before he gives up what he knows."

Not until Mr. Mason had concluded the recital after his own fashion did he give the professional gentleman an opportunity to impart the information which Dick had worked so hard to obtain; and then the physician, after telling him in a general way how the patient should be treated, wrote out in detail instructions for Mrs. Stevens to follow.

Then from his store of drugs, pills, and nauseous potions he selected such as might be needed in the case, writing on each package full directions, at the expense of at least an hour's time; and when he had finished, Dick believed that his father would suffer for nothing in the way of medicine.

"There, lad," Dr. Manter said as he concluded his labors, and tied in the smallest possible compass the articles he had set out, "I allow your mother should be able to do all that is necessary; and unless the bone is so shattered that the leg must be amputated, it is possible you will get along as well without a physician as with one."

"Do you mean there's a chance my poor old man might have to let his leg be cut off?"

"If you have described the wound correctly, I should say there was every danger. I have written, however, to your mother, so that she may be able to decide if anything of the kind is probable, and then you may be obliged to make another journey up here. At all events, if your father's life should be in danger, you may depend upon it I will come to the camp; although I am free to admit that a ride across Smoke Creek Desert isn't one that I hanker for, although you seem to have made the journey on foot and thought little of it."

"That's 'cause I was doin' it on daddy's account. How much is your price for this stuff?"

Mr. Mason instantly plunged his hand in his pocket; and before he could withdraw it the physician replied, —

"You have earned all I've given you, lad; and I'd be ashamed to take even a dollar from a plucky little shaver like you."

"But I've got ten dollars, an' can pay my way. If I'd thought the prospectors meant to give me the money instead of buyin' the rifle, I'd got along without it; but they said twice over that they wanted the gun, an' I believed 'em."

"No one can accuse you of being a beggar; but

if it's the same to you, I'd rather let this go on account, and some day perhaps, when you've struck it rich, come around and we'll have a settlement."

"Doctor, you're a man, every inch of you!" Mr. Mason said in a loud tone, as he slapped the physician on the shoulder with a force that caused him to wince with absolute pain. "You're a man; an' if the people in this town don't know it already, they shall find it out from yours truly. I reckon we can ante up a little something in this 'ere matter, so the kid won't go home empty-handed; for I tell you there's nothin' in Antelope Spring too good for him."

Again Dick looked about him in surprise that such praise should be bestowed for what seemed to him a very simple act. The kindly manner in which the physician bade him good-by, with the assurance that he would himself go to Buffalo Meadows if it should become necessary, served to increase the boy's astonishment; and instead of thanking the gentleman, he could only say, because of his bewilderment, —

"I did it for daddy, sir; an' it would be a mean kind of fellow who wouldn't do as much."

Then Mr. Mason hurried him away, and despite Dick's protests insisted on leading him from one

place to another, until it was as if he had been introduced to every citizen in the settlement.

He was not called upon to tell his story again, because his conductor did that for him; and the details of the narrative were magnified with each repetition, until Dick believed it absolutely necessary he should contradict certain portions wherein he was depicted as a hero of the first class.

When Mr. Mason had shown the boy fully around the town, he said by way of parting, —

"Now you go down to Mansfield's, an' wait there till I come."

"Where's Mansfield's?"

"That's the store where I found you."

"But I can't wait a great while, Mr. Mason. You know I've got to be back by to-morrow mornin'; an' I ought to be leavin' now, 'cause it's pretty near noon."

"Don't worry your head about that, my son. You shall get to camp before sunrise to-morrow mornin', an' without so very much work on your part, either. Now go down to Mansfield's, an' wait there till I come. Mind you don't leave this town till I'm back there."

Mr. Mason hurried away as he ceased speaking; and Dick walked slowly down the street, debating in his mind whether he must obey this order.

CHAPTER V.

DICK "PULLS THROUGH."

WHEN Dick had retraced his steps to Mansfield's he found no less than ten of the citizens there, several of whom he had already met; and all were evidently eager to talk with the boy who had walked across Smoke Creek Desert.

There were but few in that section of the country who would have dared to make the venture, although it was by no means a dangerous or difficult journey for a horseman; and Dick's bravery, in connection with all the circumstances, pleased the citizens of Antelope Spring wonderfully well.

The package Dick carried told that he had been successful in finding a physician, and Mr. Mansfield was curious to learn how much the medical gentleman had charged for his services.

"He wouldn't take a cent," Dick said in reply to the question. "It seems to me the folks in this town are mighty good."

"I don't reckon we'll ever be hung for our good-

ness," the proprietor of the shop said with a grin; "but it is considerable of a treat to see a kid with so much sand as you've shown. Dr. Manter knew which side his bread was buttered on when he wouldn't take your money; an' if your father don't get better with what you're takin' to him, you can count on Manter seein' the thing through. You've got quite a load, my son."

"Yes; an' I'm countin' on carryin' more, if you'll take money for what I buy. I don't want to set myself up for a beggar, 'cause I've got the stuff to pay for everything."

"What do you want?"

"About ten pounds of flour, and the same weight in bacon or salt pork, with a little pepper and salt, will be as much as I can carry."

"It's a good deal more'n I'd want to tote forty-five miles 'twixt now and sunset," one of the visitors remarked; and Dick replied cheerily, —

"It wouldn't seem very heavy if you was carryin' it to your folks who'd had nothin' but fresh meat to eat for the last month. Mother and Margie will be wild when I bring in that much."

"I'll put up twenty-five pounds in all, for I reckon there are other things that would come handy," Mr. Mansfield said as he began to weigh out the articles, and Dick asked quickly, —

"You're to let me pay for 'em?"

"Sure," the proprietor replied as he winked at the loungers. "You shall give all the stuff is worth."

"I didn't want to hang 'round here very long; but Mr. Mason said I was to wait for him."

"If Bob Mason give sich orders it'll be worth your while to stop a spell; for he's as cross-grained as a broncho when matters don't go to his likin', an' might make trouble for you."

Dick was considerably disturbed by this remark, which had much the sound of a threat, and looked out of the door uneasily.

The citizens had been exceedingly kind to him; but he had had no little experience with inhabitants of frontier towns, and knew that friendship might be changed to enmity very suddenly.

The shopkeeper had not finished filling the small order when Bob Mason rode up on a wiry-looking broncho, and after tying the beast to a hitching-post, entered the store.

"I had an idea that was what you were up to," one of the loungers said; and Mason replied with a laugh, —

"When we have sich a visitor as this 'ere kid, I reckon we're called on to make things pleasant for him." Then turning to Dick he added, "If it so

be your daddy pulls through all right for the next week or ten days, he should be in condition to ride this far?"

"After the horses have rested a little I counted on starting for Willow Point."

"It strikes me that would be too rough a journey for the old man at this time of the year. We're needin' kids like you in this town, an' I allow you'll find a shelter here till spring. Then, if the settlement don't suit you, it'll be only a case of goin' on when the travellin' is easier."

"Do you mean that we'd better live here?" Dick asked in surprise.

"That's the way some of us have figgered it."

"Can I find work enough to pay our way? You see, daddy won't be in shape to do anything for quite a spell."

"I'll give you a job on my ranch, an' pay fair wages."

"Then we'll be glad to stop."

"All right, my son. You shall take your own time about comin', and I'll hold the job open till you get here. Now I'm allowin' to lend you that broncho, so you can get back in case the old man grows worse. He's a tricky beast; but I reckon you'll handle him without any too much trouble. The only drawback is that I can't furnish a saddle."

"If you can spare the pony, I'll get along without the fixings," Dick replied, his eyes gleaming with delight; for with such a steed he would be able to visit the town at short notice, if it should become necessary.

"I'm allowin' that I've got a saddle he can have for a spell," Mr. Mansfield replied thoughtfully; and although Dick insisted that there was really no need of one, it was brought out.

The loungers took it upon themselves to see that the broncho was properly harnessed; and now that it was no longer necessary to limit the weight of the supplies, the shopkeeper suggested that the amount of flour and bacon be doubled.

"Will ten dollars be enough to pay for it?" Dick asked.

"We'll make a charge of it, seein's you're goin' to work for Bob Mason. You can give me an order on him after you've been here a spell, an' it'll be the same thing as cash."

"Now you're doin' the square thing, Mansfield," Mason said approvingly; and despite Dick's protests that he preferred to pay his way so long as he had the money, the matter was thus arranged.

"You are sure I can earn enough to pay for what we'll need to eat between now and spring?" the boy asked doubtfully.

"I'm allowin', from what I've seen, that you'll earn a man's wages, an' that'll be thirty dollars a month. If your father is anything like you, I'll guarantee he can find work enough to support the family; an' Antelope Spring is needin' settlers mighty bad."

The supply of provisions and the medicines were packed in a bag, divided into two portions of equal weight that they might be carried over the saddle, and then Dick was ready to mount.

He realized fully how kind the people of the town had been to him, and was eager to say that which should give token of the gratitude in his heart; but the words refused to come at his bidding.

He stammered in the attempt to speak, cleared his throat nervously, and tried again, —

"You've been mighty good, all hands, an' I'm thinkin' it'll help daddy pull through. I wish — I wish" —

"That's all right, my son," Bob Mason interrupted. "We've got a good idea of what you want to say, an' you can let it go at that. As a general thing we don't get stuck on kids; but when one flashes up in the style you have, we cotton to him mightily. You can push that 'ere broncho right along, for forty-five miles ain't any

terrible big job for him, an' canter into camp this side of midnight with considerable time to spare."

"I thank you all, an' so will mother an' daddy when they get here," he said in a husky tone, as he mounted; and then waving his cap by way of adieu, he rode away, the happiest boy to be found on either side of the Rocky Mountains.

Night had not fully come when he halted at the eastern edge of the desert to give the broncho water and grass; and here he remained an hour, the crackers and cheese left from breakfast affording an appetizing supper to a lad who had known but little variation in his bill of fare from fresh meat, broiled or stewed, more often without salt or pepper.

The stars guided him on the course across the waste of sand, and the pony made his way over the yielding surface at a pace which surprised the rider.

"He can walk four miles an hour, according to this showing, and I should be in camp before ten o'clock."

In this he was not mistaken. The broncho pushed ahead rapidly, proving that he had traversed deserts before, and was eager to complete the journey; and when Dick came within sight of the wagon, his mother was standing in front of

the camp-fire, so intent on broiling a slice of venison that she was ignorant of his coming until he shouted cheerily, —

"Here I am, mother dear, coming along with a good bit of style, and so many fine things that you'll open your eyes mighty wide when this bag is emptied. How is my poor old man?"

He had dismounted as he ceased speaking, and was instantly clasped in his mother's arms.

"O Dick, Dick, how sore my heart has been! Your father said you could not get across the desert on foot, and I have pictured you lying on the sands dying."

"You've made your pictures all wrong, dearie; for here I am in prime condition, and loaded down with good things. The people up at Antelope Spring have shown themselves to be mighty generous. How is daddy?"

"He is resting comfortably just now, although he has suffered considerable pain. Did you see a doctor?"

"Yes; an' am loaded way up to the muzzle with directions as to what must be done. Let's go in and see the poor old man, an' then I'll tell you both the story."

Mr. Stevens's voice was heard from the inside of the wagon as he spoke Dick's name; Margie clam-

bered out, her big brown eyes heavy with slumber, to greet her brother, and the boy was forced to receive her caresses before it was possible to care for the broncho.

Then, as soon as might be, Dick entered the wagon, and the hand-clasp from his father was sufficient reward for all his sufferings in the desert.

It was midnight before he finished telling of his journey, and reception by the men of Antelope Spring.

He would have kept secret the peril which came to him with the sand-storm; but his father questioned him so closely that it became necessary to go into all the details, and more than once before the tale was concluded did his mother press him lovingly to her as she wiped the tears from her eyes.

"You mustn't cry now it is all over," he said with a smile, as he returned the warm pressure of her hand. "I'm none the worse for havin' been half buried, an' we're rich. I'm countin' on pullin' out of here as soon as the horses are in condition; an' we'll stay at the town till spring—perhaps longer."

Although he claimed that he was not hungry, his mother insisted on preparing supper from the seemingly ample store of provisions; and when the

meal had been eaten it was so nearly morning that Dick would have dispensed with the formality of going to bed, but that his mother declared it was necessary he should gain some rest.

His heart was filled with thankfulness when he lay down under the wagon again, covered with a blanket; and perhaps for the first time in his life Dick did more than repeat the prayer his mother taught him, for he whispered very softly, —

"You've been mighty good to me, God, an' I hope you're goin' to let my poor old man have another whack at livin'."

Dick had repeated to his mother all the instructions given him by the physician, and before he was awake next morning Mrs. Stevens set about dressing the wound in a more thorough manner than had ever been possible before.

She was yet engaged in this task when the boy opened his eyes, and learning to his surprise that the day was at least an hour old, sprang to his feet like one who has been guilty of an indiscretion.

"What! up already?" he cried in surprise, as looking through the flap of the wagon-covering, he saw what his mother was doing.

"Yes, Dick dear, and I have good news for you. Both your father and I now think he was mistaken in believing the bone was shattered by the bullet.

Perhaps it is splintered some, but nothing more serious."

"Then you won't be obliged to have it cut off, daddy, an' should be able to get round right soon."

"There's this much certain, Dick, whether the bone is injured or not, my life has been saved through your efforts; for I know enough about gun-shot wounds to understand that I couldn't have pulled through without something more than we were able to get here."

"Yet you would have prevented me from leaving if I had told you what was in my mind."

"I should for a fact; because if one of us two must go under, it would be best for mother an' Margie that I was that one."

"Why, daddy! you have no right to talk like that!"

"It's true, Dick. I've been a sort of ne'er-do-well, otherwise I wouldn't have been called Roving Dick, while you are really the head of the house."

"I won't listen to such talk, daddy; for it sounds as if you were out of your head again, as when we were alone that night. You'll perk up after we're at Antelope Spring, an' show the people there what you can do."

"I shall be obliged to work very hard in order to make a good showing by the side of you."

Dick hurried away, for it pained him to hear his father talk in such fashion; yet at the same time he hoped most fervently that there would be no more roaming in search of a place where the least possible amount of labor was necessary, and it really seemed as if "Roving Dick" had made up his mind to lead a different life.

There was little opportunity for the boy to remain idle.

The supplies he had brought from Mr. Mansfield's shop would not suffice to provide the family with food many days unless it was re-enforced by fresh meat; and as soon as Dick had seen to it that the horses and the broncho were safe, he made preparations for a hunting-trip.

When breakfast had been eaten, and how delicious was the taste of bacon and flour-bread to this little party, which had been deprived of such food so long, he started off, returning at night-fall with a small deer and half a dozen rabbits.

The greater portion of the venison he cut up ready for smoking; and when his mother asked why he was planning so much labor for himself, he replied cheerily, —

"We're likely to lay here ten days at the very least, for the horses won't be in condition to travel in much less time; and now is my chance to put in

a stock of provisions for the winter. It never'll do to spend all my wages for food; because you and Margie are to be fitted out in proper shape, and now I haven't even the rifle to sell, for that belongs to the prospectors."

Not an idle hour did Dick Stevens spend during the time they remained encamped at Buffalo Meadows; and when the time came that his father believed they might safely begin the journey to Antelope Spring, he had such a supply of smoked meat as would keep the family in food many days.

Mr. Stevens's wound had healed with reasonable rapidity, thanks to the materials for its dressing which Dick had risked his life to procure; and on the morning they decided to cross the desert the invalid was able to take his place on the front seat of the wagon to play the part of driver.

Dick rode the broncho, as a matter of course; and to him this journey was most enjoyable.

Not until the second day did the family arrive at their destination, and Dick received such a reception as caused his cheeks to redden with joy.

Bob Mason chanced to be in front of Mansfield's store when the party rode up, and insisted on their remaining there until he could summon the inhabitants of the settlement to give them welcome.

"We're glad you've come," Mr. Mason said when he believed the time had come for him to make a speech. "We've seen the kid, an' know how much sand he's got; so if the rest of the family are anything like him, and I reckon they must be, we're gettin' the kind of citizens we hanker after. I've pre-empted the boy, an' allow he'll look out for things on the ranch as well as any man I could hire, an' a good deal better'n the average run. We've got a house here for the rest of you, an' Stevens will find plenty of work if he's handy with tools. Now then, kid, we'll get the old folks settled, an' after that I'll yank you off with me."

Mason led the way to a rude shanty of boards, which was neither the best nor the worst dwelling in the town; and to Mrs. Stevens and Margie it seemed much like a palace, for it was a place they could call home, a pleasure they had not enjoyed since leaving Willow Point two years ago.

Dick observed with satisfaction that there was a sufficient amount of furniture in the shanty to serve his parents until money could be earned with which to purchase more; and then he rode away with Bob Mason, leading the team-horses to that gentleman's corral.

He had brought his family to a home, and had

before him a good prospect of supplying them with food, even though his father should not be able to do any work until the coming spring; therefore Dick Stevens was a very happy boy.

Here we will leave him; for he is yet in Mason's employ, and it is said in Antelope Spring to-day, or was a few months ago, that when "Bob Mason hired that kid to oversee his ranch, he knew what he was about."

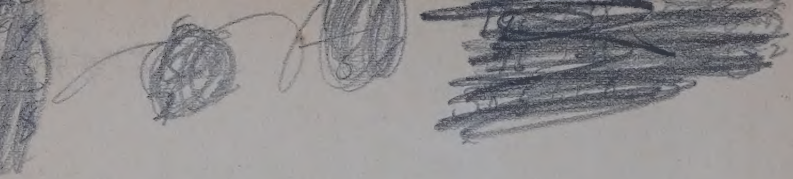
It is hard to believe that a boy only fifteen years of age (for Dick has *now* been an overseer, or "boss puncher" as it is termed in Nevada, nearly two years) could care for a ranch of six hundred acres; yet he has done it, as more than one can testify, and in such a satisfactory manner that next year he is to have an interest in the herds and flocks on the "Mason Place."

Mr. Stevens recovered from the wound in due time; and early in the spring after his arrival at the settlement, he joined Messrs. Parsons & Robinson in prospecting among the ranges.

His good fortune was even greater than Dick's; for before the winter came again the firm had struck a rich lead of silver, which has been worked with such profit that "Roving Dick's" home is one of the best and the cosiest to be found in the State.

Mr. Stevens would have been glad had young Dick decided to give up his work on the ranch; but the latter has declared again and again that he will leave mining strictly alone, because "cattle are good enough for him."

THE END.



DICK IN THE DESERT

BY

JAMES OTIS